

Escape

DOLORES REDFEARN

Mambo sounds provoke the silence, waking the sleepwalkers in the street below. Blinking neons cast a purple hue on the walls of Chenchi's blue room. The blinks keep rhythm to the music and the thrusts from a thick pelvis that lies over her thin body. Hot breaths ignite her innermost desire of floating off her balcony over blue water to a new life.

A man's raspy moan unsettles her dream. "*¡Mañana?*"

"No," she whispers.

"*¡Por qué?*"

Through the dark, the red neon-blinks reflect on her guest cinching his belt.

She breathes deeply upon hearing the door click open and shut.

"Because I am leaving Cuba," she says to the empty space.

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She had already paid the price—a price paid in coins and tarnished values. Three hundred dollars had bought her that much. The priceless ingredient was as obscure as her point of departure. All identities in the venture kept secret. Cuba was full of secrets. Cubans, kept in the dark on political matters, were required to listen for hours to speeches given at Revolutionary Square—innuendos and secrecy prevailing.

Clandestine elements of the plan were synchronized by her contact: a knock, a message, an estimated time of departure ("ETD,"

she'd heard said) yet to be determined. Then there was the issue of weather. A window of opportunity on calm nights like tonight allures, often skirting gulf winds—*los vientos*—that force rival tides to morph into voracious sea monsters likely to swallow skiffs whole.

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She lay in the dark, awaiting the knock. Thoughts of her uncle shadow-danced to muted drums: Her mother's brother, as roguish and handsome as her mother was beautiful, often played the odds and made or lost fortunes with the toss of the dice in places like the glass-domed Tropicana, known for its Cuban women. Only dust remained and echoes of clacking stilettos on slim-legged women in shimmering strands, used to descending from a spiral staircase like falling stars. Her mother had been one of Havana's heavenly, though never quite reaching that stardust gate. A state Chenchi had never reached, and wondered if her mother had before she died—of grief, her grandmother said. *More like shattered dreams*, Chenchi thought. Women, still as beautiful, abandon professions for the more lucrative scenarios that unfold over drinks at the Hotel Nacional, brimming with Canadians or *Americanos* who bent rules to get to Cuba—ah, Cuba, land of strong booze and easy women.

She fingered the dollars tucked under her pillow. The only money left from the final payment made on a passage for two. She had paid the price—paid in full with money earned in ways she wasn't so proud to admit, especially to her grandmother, who probably already knew. Every night she stuffed half of her night's take into a stocking in hope that some coyote offered safe passage for her and Carlos, her intended. Only yesterday she had given Carlos his half to give to the contact.

She had to chuckle or cry at a thought that nagged: Had she paid for a raft? A raft that might be devoured with the first rogue wave, or perchance have the fate of a five-year-old who recently survived two nights at sea clinging to an inner tube. “Divine intervention,” her grandmother said.

Her escape had been conceived by someone named Juaquin. Who was this Juaquin Longoria? Words emerged as if *Mamita* whispered, and she brushed aside a streak of fear. Unlike her grandmother, Chenchi had to count on the better side of the heart and on friends.

There was Carlos and, depending on the day, there was Mona. “Someone who laughs so loud has something to hide,” *Mamita* warned.

She turned *Mamita*’s picture toward the wall. “Hush, *Mamita*. Hush,” she whispered. A knock interrupted.

“Chenchi, it’s me. *Abra la puerta.*”

Chenchi jarred the door. She was met by a cyclopean eye.

Everything about Mona demanded a second glance: her hair; her nose; her lips, the color of raw liver, were always parted in rips of laughter. Her features, too large for her narrow face, were upstaged only by her seductive flutterings; she wore a different earring on either ear, shoes that didn’t match, a thin rhinestone fixed over her left eyelid, and a faux emerald in her navel.

“Open the door.” Clasp her blue-polished fingernails around the edge of the door, “Get dressed,” she said.

In the dim light Chenchi could see a man standing behind Mona. She had the habit of bringing customers unannounced. And they weren’t always the best; she kept those for herself.

“I’m expecting someone.”

“Okay. I’ll be back in an hour.”

Go away, Mona, she thought and closed the door.

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She had known Mona forever. Mona was one of the lucky few whose family could afford to send her to New Orleans to live with an aunt of some redeemable qualities—world traveler, scholar of art history, and fluent in French.

Mona had a mind to do anything she wanted, and yet she had returned from across the ocean. Happily so, it seemed. Chenchi hadn’t shared her plans. Mona wouldn’t understand and was apt to dissuade or encourage, whatever her whim. And she’d had a few.

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Time was when Mona duped Chenchi into an “arrangement.” She had looked older than her fifteen years. Her escort for the evening might have been a serial killer for all she knew. As it turned out, he was just ugly. Boring and ugly. She wasn’t murdered, but she may just as well have been. It didn’t matter that she had been deflowered. As the evening wore on, her romantic notion of the “first time” was displaced by brute reality. “How old?” And when she told, he rushed out, forgetting one sock, a hotel key, and fifty American dollars. If her grandmother was right about knowing who you are by the friends you keep, now she was just like Mona.

All the knowledge in the world about Michelangelo or Botticelli or Titian would not make anything else of Mona but a whore well-versed in French and in European art. Mona wasn’t attractive. Yet she evoked mystery by speaking in half sentences with dangling innuendos. “Tell me, tell me,” her listeners would plead until she’d toss a suggestive crumb that lured men.

“I have something to show you,” she said one evening as she lit one of her cigarillos.

Mona blew smoke rings and pulled outrageous gadgets from a tin box, as if she were extracting exotic fowl from a top hat.

“A chartreuse feather? What ever for, Mona?”

“Chenchi, Chenchi,” Mona repeated, accenting the *Chen* for effect. “Lighten up. Your blue room doesn’t tell. People come and go, come and go; don’t leave them longing.”

“But once done, a fantasy is gone,” Chenchi argued.

Not to stand in line for hours just to have the ice cream vendor shrug, palms turned upward, was a fantasy that Mona said didn’t count. “Well, what about soap, deodorant, undergarments?”

It was *Mamita* who remembered, having had deodorant, but no schools, silk undergarments, but no money, and doctors, but no medicines. Luxury now was a mere rationing of food and Cuban drums, like metronomes marking time.

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Lost in rhythmic beats, Chenchi could rise to higher dimensions. In Havana, where she was known as *La Reyna Merengue*, Chenchi dreamed of her own dance troupe with children who would salsa their way into the hearts of people all over the world, except America, where even the bans seemed within reach, as was her crossing from Cuba, the land of free meals and no ice cream.

Chenchi walked onto her balcony. Looking over the balustrade, she listened to the din of the street—congeros, bongos, *timbales*, and claves. Below a grandmother strolled with two children tripping lightly. “*Buenas noches, abuelita*,” she responded and waved.

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Havana was worn, beauty clinging to bare bones of abandoned mansions, like where she lived. How, she wondered, had her life fallen into such a state? What she had learned is that in this political environment, rum and cigarettes were easier to come by than money. And men without coins in their pockets to jingle felt powerless and turned to sex.

Mona didn't care for Cuban politics. She took on *politicos* for profit and turned a blind eye. "Don't laugh," Mona advised. "No matter how ridiculous they act, don't laugh." Even crowing like a rooster with a chartreuse feather stuck up their "arse"—her Englishman customer had pronounced it. The image left Chenchi perplexed as to what she would do under similar circumstances.

"Chenchi! Chenchi!" Someone knocked.

Carlos, she thought, or *Juaquin*. Both, by now, knew the location and perhaps the ETD. Remote parts of the island were deserted; no one knew or cared to know about unlawful happenings. In the past, revolutionaries had dealt with deserters. Loyalty above all. Chenchi's father, in his attempt to leave "the cause," was seized. He was blindfolded, forced to kneel, and shot.

"He knelt and..." Her uncle retold events like a scratched record, too abrasive to endure. "...the order was casually given, 'Shoot him,' as if saying 'good night' or 'good-bye.' One shot, one bullet, and..." She walked toward the door, trying hard to convince herself these were not revolutionary times.

"Open up, Chenchi. I know you're in there."

She jarred the door and slipped off the chain; Mona walked in.

The low light from the lamp cast a green glow on the walls. Mona sat on the edge of the bed and examined her surroundings. An overstuffed chair claimed a corner; one chiffonier leaned against the wall, and lace curtains, frayed from years of flapping against the sill, hung limp. Lights and shadows fashioned stripes and foliage in verdant van Gogh tones. The upholstery, old and worn like rich tapestry, displayed intricately woven floral.

“Why aren’t you dressed? I’ve got two *papis* lined up at the Lido.”

“No, Mona, not tonight.” Chenchi propped the pillows behind her head, readying herself for Mona’s sell:

“One *pasote*—a hunk. The other *suavecito*. A little dancing, a few mojitos, and voilà. What do you think?”

“I think you’re crazy. Besides, how do you know they’ll show?” Chenchi had been left waiting by men lured away by rival beauties referred to as *primo* choices. “I can’t. Not tonight.”

Mona laughed. “It’s Little Boy Blue, isn’t it? Carlos, *Carlitos*. *Aye, mi amor*,” she teased. And reaching for Chenchi’s foot, she tickled the sole with a feather. “Tell me. Tell me, or else.”

Chenchi waggled herself free, only to be tortured again. “Stop it, Mona. Stop, so I can tell.” She wasn’t good at manipulating words when truth worked. “Carlos and I are getting married.”

“He’s sweet, but face it, he’ll never be *papirich*. *¿Entiendes?*”

“I understand that you’re crazy, Mona.”

“I won’t take ‘no.’ Come on. It’s nighttime and all the creatures of the night come out to feast. We’ll have a good, good time. I promise.”

Outside a percussionist had caught merengue fever. The kind that happens when rhythm attacks bone marrow and, like a virus,

forces the body to respond: fingers, shoulders, hips, toes, feet moving uncontrollably. Mona stood, cigarillo dangling, her hips undulating. “*Ti lin, ti lin. Ta lan, ta lan.*” Her eyes flashed like beacons as she sidestepped across the room, trailing her silk scarf. “Midnight. *¿De acuerdo?*”

“No, Mona.”

“Yes! Yes! Yes! Don’t leave me in the lurch with both. I’ll have to resort to...” She winked and blew Chenchi a kiss. “I’ll be waiting at the Lido with some Juaquin guy. Join us.”

“Juaquin? Wait, Juaquin who?” A sinking feeling settled in the pit of Chenchi’s gut.

Mona shrugged. “I never ask last names. But he’s buying, so who cares?”

“Mona, try to remember. Is it Longoria?” Mona silently sidestepped her way out the door. She left as she had come, laughing and trailing her stream of sensuous vapors.

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Chenchi held her breath, refusing to take in the sensuous vapors. Oh well, she sighed, if tonight’s plan failed, there was always tomorrow—*mañana*, always *mañana*, a good description of Cuba. Trouble is, *mañanas* never come overnight. If she didn’t leave tonight, it might be six months before the weather turned.

In the past she would have worried over Mona’s words. Not tonight. After all, how many Juaquins were there? It’s a common name. Okay, even if Mona just happened to meet Juaquin Longoria, why not buy her a drink? He’s a businessman. Carlos had the final payoff. In the past Mona stirred murky waters. “No, Mona. No funny business tonight.”

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She dressed by layering what few clothes she had and packed a small bag with few mementos. Dusting off *Mamita*, she brought the photo to her cheek and remembered her grandmother's rough hands and the sour smell of her fat knees. She regarded the image for a moment—sweet soul always pictured with a scowl—then returned it to its marked space. “So where is Carlos now, Chenchi? What kind is he to leave his intended to worry? Answer that.”

She carefully wrapped her shawl around *Mamita's* photo. “There might be a weather delay,” Chenchi answered. “That’s all.”

She would miss her grandmother. In truth, she couldn't face one more night of “Thank you, Chenchi,” any more than spend another moment in the blue room. She knew every chink in every layer of paint. A brazen sapphire had bled through the cool cobalt. The twelve-foot ceiling that used to make the room spacious had shrunk to the size of a huge casket. She kept her shutters open most of the time for that very reason. The Timex in the drawer, a gift from one of her customers, ticked loudly. She wrapped it in a pair of scanty briefs and closed the drawer.

She'd bear the wait, if she could just keep her mind on Carlos. In America she would marry him. She liked that she was spoken for; it sounded so decent. Once across the ocean, she would study, find a job. *Mamita* would gladly accept money from work that required her to wear clothes, not shed them. She examined herself in the chink of mirror and brushed an unruly lock from her eyes.

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Mona's seductive words lingered: The Lido was not the best of clubs to attend unescorted. It had been, and still was, a club of questionable

nature, entertainment on the raw side of erotica. No *papiriches* there. Maybe, just maybe, she would join Mona and meet this generous Juaquin who buys drinks in seedy bars. One glance and she'd know. She'd know if this was Juaquin, the dealmaker. She hesitated for a moment at the door.

The streets stirred. All Havana walked the streets, nodding to greet each other like ants—the old, the young, the poor. They were all poor, especially the sleepwalkers.

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Smoke filled the room. Chatting customers linked by words or touch, from hand to elbow to shoulder, as if connecting flesh diluted loneliness or shame—loneliness, for family that had left Cuba—shame, for those who had failed or died trying to leave. Bottles passed from lip to lip, glasses not always available in such bars.

She heard a high-pitched laugh from the far corner and turned in time to see a thicket of hair, hair that brushed over someone's face. Mona had snared her catch for the night; she held her prey, connecting lips to some unsuspecting soul. His feeble attempt to escape her clutch failed. Chenchi smiled, watching Mona at her best. A second familiar laugh tittered nervously upon release. My God, it was Carlos. Mona held Carlos in her clutches. Chenchi watched her tousle his hair. And Carlos sat, just sat, smiling a nondescript smile. Clever quips Chenchi had practiced for such moments scattered like broken beads. She stood, lower lip aquiver, and turned to find a way out. Mona's panoptic vision caught her.

"Chenchi, ¡ven!"

¡Ven? Was Mona stupid enough to think she'd be her next juicy meal? She stared poisoned darts, hoping they'd spear their mark.

Carlos, who made one feeble attempt to rise, responded more to Mona's shove. He sat, eyes cast down, avoiding Chenchi.

So much for you, Mona. She shoved past a few desperate hands. In the stretch-mirror across the bar, she caught a glimpse of some slumped-shouldered creature with limp, dark hair, eyes that lacked luster. Who was that? Chenchi stood stilled by her own reflection—someone she no longer recognized.

The lump in her throat restrained a floodgate of tears. She heard nothing except the clacking of her own heels against the cobblestone. She longed for the comfort of her own bed.

A light summer rain fell, lifting the scent of Cuba from the streets. She hated the thought of facing the blue room. It would speak words she didn't care to hear about Carlos, about Mona. "Fool! ¡*Que te lo dije, pendeja!*"

Shut up. Shut up! She walked fast, thinking of her mother, her father, and blurring into images by Michelangelo from a postcard that she'd saved. *Why?* she wondered. *Why chisel a perfect David? Why not a one-eyed Cyclops?*

In her room she clicked the lamp-chain; changing her mind, she clicked it off. She would sit in the dark and wait for Juaquin. She would wait for as long as it took. People on the island knew about happenings, even secret ones. If he intended to live here peacefully, Juaquin would at least send a messenger to explain the delay. Listening to the rain pelt on the closed shutter, she rested her head against the pillow and imagined two dolphins leaping in the swells near the bow of a boat. The boy on an inner tube had watched dolphins. Who knew what frightful encounters he'd met? But fate smiled, or divine intervention, and he reached land.

She arose to adjust the shutters. How much time had passed? She opened the dresser drawer but, disregarding her timepiece, closed it again. Below her balcony, three young men stood, arms entwined, like *compañeros*. They swayed to the distant music fading along with the evening.

“Come down, Chenchi. *Andale*,” one called. She couldn’t help but smile. Not recognizing any of them, she ignored the second call.

“*Andale*, Chenchi, *ven aqua*.”

One *compañero* whistled; a smile spread across the face. His body was perfectly proportioned, and his dark hair curled over angular, strong cheekbones. He was as beautiful as the postcard Mona had sent her from Florence. Chenchi could only imagine the David, a body too beautiful to touch. She stepped out on her balcony to taste the rain and imagined running her tongue down a wet slab of cold marble, marble perfectly chiseled into a curved spine and over a smile on perfectly chiseled lips. And arms with beautiful biceps strong enough to lift and twirl, twirl, twirl her to Viennese waltzes played at Plaza San Marco.

This David bowed and smelled a rose before he tossed it. Just missing the ledge, the rose fell; he let out a moan. Laughing, his *compadre* lifted a bottle of rum. The third companion with undulating hips kept perfect rhythm. They all swayed to the drumbeat; David, by far, had the best moves. “*¡Por qué no?*”

She shrugged. Had they offered her a ride or *dinero* or even an umbrella... Rain dotted her cheeks, making them cold to the touch. Retreating, she closed the shutters as slowly as curtains brought down on a staged performance. In the darkness of her room, Chenchi’s damp

cheek was stained from the imprint she left on the wall. “*Andale, Chenchi*” inspired another glimpse through the shutter slats. David’s antics beckoned—a tilt of his head, a mischievous smile; a promise of things to come. “*Ven, Chenchi.*”

Drawn once more to her balcony, she neared the balustrade. Raindrops ran down the nape of her neck, splatting the cobblestones below. Balanced on the precipice of a dream, her thoughts flitted across the ocean in aerial grace.

How? Chenchi wondered, her twinge of envy sinking to despair. How could this David have a gleam in his eye? So content, just to be. □